

Embodying “twoness in oneness” in Diana Evans’ *26a*¹

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Diana Evans’ debut novel *26a* deals with the parallel childhood and subsequent dissimilar adult development of a set of female identical twins. Identical twins problematize the definition of identity and individuality by their superfluity, since being an identical twin is paradoxical, in that that one’s body is a signifier of both individuality and twoness or duality. This article investigates the space of individual identity. Focusing on the body as the primary space of interaction, it analyzes the problematics inherent to a relation of twinship in Nigerian and western tradition, and the significance of the trope of twins in Evans’ narrative, where it functions as a way of negotiating an ethnically diverse identity. The idea of space is important in the construction of the twins’ identities; physical dislocation and dissimilar experiences bring about identity crises, and eventually death for one of the twins.

Key words: Diana Evans, body, space, diasporic identity, twins, *26a*

Introduction

Diana Evans is an emergent contemporary British writer, whose debut novel *26a* won the inaugural Orange Prize for New Writers in 2005 as well as the Arts Council England’s Decibel Writer of the Year Award in 2006; on its publication it received considerable critical attention (Bryce, Cooper, Cuder-Domínguez). As was the case with other female contemporary novelists of Black British descent such as Zadie Smith, Evans’ recognition by literary critics went hand in hand with the novel’s success in the eyes of the general public. Evans was defined as “the latest literary sensation” (Wajid 18) and *26a* was described as a “lush, delightful, heartbreaking novel about a rough-and-tumble family

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living in tatty Neasden in the 80s and 90s” (Steffens n.pag). Regardless of the obvious differences between Evans’ *26a* and Smith’s *White Teeth*,¹ comparisons were soon drawn, based mainly on the fact that both authors portray North London mixed-race family life (Koning; Pearson). However, Evans rejects the categorization of her novel as a depiction of a multicultural, mixed-race London society and denounces certain expectations of Black writing: “there’s been a real thematic limitation in terms of race and urban life. Often, as black writers, we’re published because we’re talking about race, and that creates a burden of responsibility to cover racial issues” (Wajid 19). Such utterances seem to stress Evans’ reluctance to be considered as a “Black writer” for whom race and ethnicity have to be at the core of her literary production. Evans states that her work approaches human experiences in a universal way: “[it is] about the unhappiness in some people’s lives [...] rather than [being] about what it means to be black or mixed-race” (In Conversation with Evaristo 33).² Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis of her novel challenges this position, as I shall argue in this essay.

In fact, *26a* is a Bildungsroman that centers its storyline on the growing process of a pair of identical twins of Nigerian-British origin, Georgia and Bessi, and in this respect can be placed in the category of recent Nigerian and Black British Bildungsromane. Within this tradition, Hron examines works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) and Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005). Yet, as Cuder-Domínguez explains, Oyeyemi’s and Evans’ novels stand out, for they “explore the bicultural, biracial condition of their protagonists within the context of contemporary Britain” (280). In Diana Evans’ novel there are two connected problems that affect the twins’ “twoness in oneness” as it is referred to in the novel (42). One is the need to identify themselves as hybrid diasporic identities -- thus defining themselves as Nigerian, British and/or hybrid Nigerian/British individuals; and

the other is the urge to delimit individuality within a relation of twinship, even when one of the members of the twinhood disappears. As Evans herself has said: “being a twin does not stop when there is only one of you, because there is never really only one of you. Once a twin, always a twin” (“My Other Half” n.pag).

Taking this remark into consideration, the current essay examines the struggle the twins undergo in order to find their individual space within the twin relationship as well as within their ethnically diverse family. Space is an important aspect of the novel on various levels. On the one hand, the novel draws on the topic of individuals’ physical space and the (re)negotiation of body boundaries. On the other hand, in *26a* twinhood influences and is influenced by the external spaces in which the twins are located and where they interact. The novel thus stresses the bidirectional relation established between the social and the spatial, which has been emphasized by theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and Doreen Massey. These social relations are especially significant, for they are characterized by both twinship and hybridity. This essay thus investigates the space of individual identity, focusing on the body as the primary space of interaction. By taking into consideration the internal and the external spaces that affect Georgia and Bessi, it problematizes critical evaluations of the struggle to find one’s own emotional space and sense of identity.

Georgia and Bessi’s internal space(s): the problematics of twin identity

In *26a* the evolution in the definition of the self from being a twin in childhood, to an independent individual in adulthood, brings about identity problems, and eventually death for one of the twins. One underlying factor in this tragedy is that the paradox of being an identical twin means that one’s body is a signifier of both individuality and twoness or duality. The body is a space in itself; it is “the geography closest in” (Valentine 23); it is

the primary space we inhabit and the means by which we socialize, relate to other bodies and create a sense of individuality and identity. To the external world, the body is the “boundary between the individual subject and that which is Other to it [and it is] the container of individual identity” (McDowell and Sharp 3). Individuality is equated with one body in space so that the idea of identity in the collective imaginary could be summarized in the equation: one body hosts one identity. However, Georgia and Bessi, being twins, understand identity from the moment of their birth as the sum of two people. The recollection of their birth, at the very beginning of the narrative, is indicative of this fact: “That was the memory that stayed with them: *two furry creatures* with petrified eyes staring into the oncoming headlights, *into the doubled icy sun*, into possibility. *It helped explain things. It reminded them of who they were*” (Evans 3; emphasis added).³ Georgia and Bessi’s comprehension of themselves as a dual entity renders them, in childhood, unable to codify identity in other (singular) terms. This inability is inherent to the twins’ preoccupation with Ham, their hamster.

In the twins’ early years, Ham is an extended part of themselves and is portrayed as a lost and unhappy being, whose sadness is deepened by the fact that he is a singular entity: “*What am I?* The question that preceded all others. *The hamster was alone, which made it worse*” (5; emphasis added). Moreover, Ham is significantly described as not simply being ginger but as “ginger-furred with streaks of white” (4); this allusion to Ham’s streaks of white is symbolic, especially since Evans describes the twins’ thoughts as also containing “white stripes” (43). Considering the different ethnicities of the twins’ parents and the influence of British culture in their upbringing, the reference to a white pattern suggests hybridity, mixture and the presence of aspects of a white British culture in an otherwise Nigerian or, in the case of Ham, “ginger” identity. In this respect, opening 26a with such an image suggests the two (connected) identity problems that affect the twins:

on the one hand, biracialism and, on the other hand, the struggle to establish the primary boundary of self-being.

With regard to the latter, twins do not fit into the image society has of what constitutes self-uniqueness. The coexistence of multiple personalities within one single body space, or the existence of two individuals with the same body appearance, troubles the above categorization. In this respect, identical twins cannot be incorporated, at first glance, into this definition of identity and individuality and this creates uneasiness both for the twins and for the people surrounding them. One of the first reactions that people have towards twins is an interest in -- it could almost be referred to as an anxiety about -- being able to tell them apart. Evans accounts for this shocking experience in the novel when it dawns on the twins that their individual traits, so evident to their eyes, are opaque to others: “Georgia and Bessi didn’t believe in looking absolutely the same because that was there in their faces [sic] [...]. But these differences were almost invisible to outsiders. They were the same, like dolls” (42). This inability of others to appreciate their individualities is significant for the twins, to the extent that it forces them to question their identity status. In an attempt to discover their individual traits, the twins pose like statues in front of a friend, Reena, while she scrutinizes their body differences and expresses her findings in her own language:

1. Georgia’s mouth is biggest.
2. Georgia has big ears, Bessie don’t.
3. Bessie’s eyes are smallest.
4. Georgia is half an inch tallest and a bit fatter.
5. Georgia has a beauty spot by her mouth – she is prettiest. (42)

The twins' singular attributes and exceptional status⁴ are highlighted for the first time at school. The social context with which bodies interact is burdened with practices and ideologies that permeate the body and provide constructed meanings to it. As an outcome of this process, the body becomes a socio-cultural artefact, that is, the "site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution [...] a cultural, the cultural product" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 23). Georgia and Bessi's bodies are considered to go against a normal categorisation of body identity because in their "twoness in oneness" they are different. Their status as twins gives rise to specific social practices entailing special considerations in order to undo that condition. In their schooling, Georgia and Bessi are physically separated by designation into different classes due to their being twins: "The staff have discussed it and decided it was time they pursued their individual paths" (85). Georgia and Bessi, as children, are still developing the necessary competences to determine self-identity and, accordingly, internalize those practices and others, such as a colour dress code, as a tool that enhances a sense of completeness and reinforces a sense of individuality: "If they wore different clothes it meant that they could be whole people inside themselves, because people could see that Georgia was Georgia, in turquoise, and Bessi was Bessi, in pink" (43). These practices induce an individuality in the twins that, at this point, is superficial and imposed rather than real or self-motivated: "The real differences, the ones that mattered most, were inside, under clothes and in the soul. There was light and there was shade" (43). Through this reference to light versus shade, the narrative provides a proleptic indication of how the twins' personalities are going to evolve into incomplete, polarized positions, as I shall argue in the last section of this essay.

The trope of the twin in 26a

Evans herself has highlighted the trope of the twin as the cornerstone around which the plot of this novel develops: “I wanted to try and encapsulate what it was like, how it felt to be a twin, to have this other person in your life who was also, in a way, your other self existing outside of you, in another body” (“10 Questions” n.pag). Evans’ description of *26a* as autobiographical (In Conversation with Evaristo 33) might suggest that the use of the trope of twinship is limited to describing her own experiences. Yet the notion of twinship and doubles, central to Evans’ novel, has always featured in the western collective imaginary and is also a recurrent element in Nigerian writing.⁵ There is a whole literary tradition on the theme of twins and doubles and on their extraordinary nature, since twins have been continuously interpreted as having mystical significance (Schwartz). I shall briefly mention some examples of this tradition before considering the significance of the trope of the twins in *26a*. As early as in Apocalyptic Texts, twins were considered as symbols of evil: “women giving birth to monsters [that is, twins], quoth 4 Esdras 5.8, would be a sign of the End” (Schwartz 49). Twins have also been a recurrent motif in mythology (as in the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus) and in literature and psychology; they have been used to raise and explain questions of self-consciousness, identity, good and evil personality split, and the role and influence of nature and nurture.⁶

Evans’ engagement with the theme of twins, and the references to Georgia’s inhabitation into Bessi’s body at the end of the novel, have to be understood not just as being grounded in her emotional experiences as a twin whose sister dies, but also as being imbued by Evans’ cultural and ethnic background. She is the daughter of British and Nigerian parents and, consciously or unconsciously, brings to the fore traditional Nigerian cultural beliefs related to twins. Ethnological studies show how, in Nigeria, twins were considered by some communities, such as the Igbo in South Eastern Nigeria, to be

exceptional, alien and “abnormal”, and accordingly, either despised and eradicated or respected and venerated. In both cases, twins were understood to stand outside of the realms of society (Renne and Misty). As Baba, Georgia and Bessi’s grandfather explains, in Edo communities in South-Western Nigeria, one of the twins was killed (63).

Part of this extraordinary status given to twins, both in western and African communities, comes from the idea that they come from a single soul that is embodied in two different human beings at the same time -- “twoness in oneness” once again. There is no one-to-one relation between soul and body and, thus, the idea of the embodiment of one soul in each corporeal manifestation is broken. *26a* draws on this common belief by putting into Georgia and Bessi’s elder sister’s mouth the following words: “It takes a soul to make a body come true” (208). This, in turn, is related to ideas of superfluity, as one of the twins is considered to be unnecessary. Their presence challenges the “normal” social order of a body as one complete space. Evans engages with these past ideas surrounding twins in the case of Nigeria by bringing to life ancient cultural practices related to them.

Evans refers to the story told by Baba when they were living in Nigeria to fictionalize the entry of Georgia’s body into Bessi’s at the end of the novel. Baba tells the sisters the story of twins Onia and Ode:

Onia was first. Ode was second -- they set her on fire. When Ode was burnt [...] Onia got sick and wouldn’t eat at all until Ode’s ghost entered her body. The ghost came in, and Onia began to eat again from her cursed mother’s breast. But Ode could only stay for one year, because that was how long it took for the soul to be ready to leave the earth. (63)

Like Ode, Georgia enters Bessi’s body after committing suicide and inhabits it for three months, embodying their twoness in one single body space. The narrative gives voice to

Georgia's spirit as she explains to Bessi that she was carried through a forest "in the body of a child and her dress had turned to rags and her name is Ode in Onia" (212). Through this reference, Evans unearths past Nigerian practices that attempted to make right the superfluity in a relation of twins, and incorporates vernacular Nigerian motifs. This use of tradition is a common element in recent diasporic novels dealing with twinning -- novels that, Brenda Cooper argues, "are predicated on a degree of acceptance of African beliefs in the special power of twins, which were widespread through parts of West Africa" (52). Moreover, Evans unites modern and traditional ways of storytelling to recount the fate of the twins after Georgia's death, thus portraying in her writing a multilayered sense of belonging. Her novel does not belong exclusively to British literature, Black literature or Nigerian literature but to all three and none at the same time (Pérez-Fernández 148). This aspect, therefore, defies Evans' claim to consider her novel as dealing with human experiences at a universal level.

At the same time, however, Evans' novel reflects Georgia and Bessi's attempt to find a space of self-definition. Such a pursuit is a common experience for twins, regardless of their ethnic and cultural origins; for identical twins have to accept that there is always going to be another human being who is constantly around and who is their mirror image: "twins themselves have ever struggled to define themselves both as two and as one" (Schwartz 44). This is a paradoxical situation that differentiates the growing process of twins from that of a singleton:

They are defined as "the twins", a part of a twosome, however this definition challenges a concept of a single identity. To have this means, in a sense, being without their twin, but this in turn requires a denial or loss of their sense of twinship. (Woodward 5)

This paradox stresses, at the same time that it explains, Georgia and Bessi's struggles in adolescence and their later uneven development.

Georgia and Bessi's external spaces of interaction

The individual body, and the context where it is located, have a direct effect on the building-up of our sense of identity. Through the second half of the 20th century, theorists have pointed out the relationship between space, society and identity (Keith and Pile; Grosz 1992; Massey), as a result of which "the subject can only 'know from' [...]. Therefore, abstracting subjectivity from time and space becomes an impossibility" (Pile and Thrift 29). The twins' family -- which is, apart from their relation of twinship, the primary space of social interaction -- affects their identity by reinforcing such a sense of loss and doubleness that they attempt to counter it through the creation of a space of their own within the household: the loft.

Georgia and Bessi live from the early 1980s to the late 1990s in Neasden, a social space characterized by multiethnicity and multiculturalism. At the beginning of the 1980s, Neasden had the highest proportion of New Commonwealth and Pakistani population of any council in the United Kingdom, as well as the third largest concentration of Afro-Caribbean people in London (Cross et al. 11-12). Nowadays, it is considered one of the city's multicultural centres, displaying "a richness of cultural heritage that makes the rest of cosmopolitan London pale by comparison" (Cross et al. 11). The twins' family is an example of the multiethnicity that characterizes Neasden. Their mum, Ida, born in Aruwa, Nigeria, migrates to London when she is seventeen, to marry Aubrey, a British man she meets in Lagos. However, the parents are presented in Evans' narrative as lost, uprooted and incomplete beings themselves, are unable to function as stable referents for Georgia and Bessi's childhood identities. The nature of

Ida and Aubrey's marital relation is questioned in *26a*. Both of them see their engagement and later wedding as a means of escape from an existence they despise: "Aubrey Hunter and Ida Tokhokho met in darkness" (36). The characters meet literally in a dark cinema, but metaphorically the sentence refers to the fact that they were both lost in their interior conflicts and considered their marriage as a lifeboat (37). Ida elopes from her home town to avoid an arranged marriage and Aubrey conceives his journey to Nigeria as a refuge from his possessive mother and disturbing childhood: "Aubrey dreamed of another kind of escape, not from a future, but from a past" (31). Aubrey's father is a verbally violent man who constantly ridicules him; in turn, his mother, in an attempt to overprotect the weakest of her three male children, destroys her son's self-esteem.

Both Aubrey and Ida are seen by the twins as also having dual personalities. They live double lives in double spaces and their resort to this doubling coincides with mechanisms of defence, self-preservation and coping. Aubrey is literally referred to by the twins and their other sisters as "Mr Hyde" when he is inebriated: "Mr Hyde forgets the man he came from. He is made up of the worst parts of that man -- they often forget each other" (103). Ida, for her part, unable to come to terms with her marriage, and the space and culture where she is re/located, brings her mother, Nne-Nne, continuously to her mind. Nne-Nne is the embodiment of her other life as much as the referent she draws upon in order to be able to negotiate reality in London. Ida is a diasporic subject inhabiting an environment characterized by ambivalence; as a diasporic space it "invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings" (Brah 193). In Ida's case London fails to become a potential site for such a clean start, since she is unable to identify herself in and with the new space. She is accordingly described as a woman located in an in-between position, surrounded by the

ghosts of the past and resorting to withdrawal in order to cope with life: “Ida gave the impression -- the quietness, the sideways look -- of someone who was always leaving and had never fully arrived, only hers was a different place altogether. It was on the map in the hallway” (18).

In such a family setting, Georgia and Bessi seek to create their own counter space of self-protection: the loft. This is a space of disconnection from their disturbing family life that allows them to construct an alternative sense of identity. The loft not only separates them physically from the rest of the family -- “they [Georgia and Bessi] lived at 26a Waifer Avenue and the other Hunters were 26, down the stairs where the house was darker” (5) -- but also represents the twins’ mental detachment. The loft is a joint space, a space of twoness, which the twins have appropriated and named “G+B”: “This was the extra dimension. The one after sight, sound, smell, touch and taste where the world multiplied and exploded because it was the sum of two people. Bright was twice as bright. All the colours were extra” (5). It symbolizes the twins’ mirror identity and parallel growth and becomes the spatial embodiment of their twinship: the safe haven they resort to. The loft is significantly, if unsurprisingly, described as “the only room in the house that had triangles and slanting walls” (6). The image of the triangle suggests multiplicity rather than duality, and the loft becomes a hybrid location, of the kind that Homi Bhaba calls a Third-Space “that gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). It provides Georgia and Bessi with the space to contest (given) identities. The loft is not merely the union of the sisters but the mixture of the two and, more than that, a space of (re)definition and possibility where boundaries are blurred. It represents the twins’ identity not only in binary terms as the shared space of twinship, but also as the result of their mother’s Nigerian ethnic background and their father’s British one. Yet the outcome

is not the mixture of these two, but a new Nigerian-British identity that goes beyond both of them to create a third element. Nigeria, Britain and twinship are all constituents of this new identity, and, as with a triangle, the three parts are equally important. The loft becomes the physical location that secures belonging and Georgia's and Bessi's identities.

Georgia and Bessi's unparalleled experiential spaces

Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift followed Donna Haraway in pointing out that our understanding of the world is "situated" and variable since bodies are not still but in an ongoing process of dis/location and change. The inner-body's interaction with the outside world is clearly delimited by concrete spatial and temporal frameworks:

The body is in constant motion. Even at rest, the body is never still. As bodies move they trace out a path from one location to another. These paths constantly intersect with those of others in a complex web of biographies. (Pile and Thrift 26)

Bodies are therefore understood to be in a permanent process of transformation. Moreover, just as as bodies are regarded as malleable, so identity is thought to be a fluid category (Bondi; Butler). In *26a*, Georgia's and Bessi's identities are constructed as malleable and in a continuous process of (trans)formation and this is presented as being directly related to the space(s) where they are located. They suffer a physical dislocation when they migrate from the United Kingdom to Nigeria and vice versa that, as I argue, brings about an identity struggle that seemed latent up until that point in the narrative: their hybrid identity. In this sense, it could be argued that Georgia and Bessi incarnate "twoness in oneness" twice; that they have a double sense of doubleness. The problems that Georgia and Bessi face through childhood and adolescence have to be considered as deriving from their twinship, as well as from their ethnically diverse origin: "Biracialism

here, the merging of two cultural identities, becomes another facet of the twin phenomenon; biracial children, like twins, can be seen as ‘half and half children’, alternately split and doubled” (Bryce 60).

The process of migration further complicates their identity quest and their sense of belonging; the loft signifies home for the twins and migration involves not only physical movement and the loss of the real space of the loft but a process Sara Ahmed has termed “a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied” (341-42). Consequently, when they have to move to Nigeria and the house is rented out, Georgia and Bessi see the possibility of having lodgers in their loft as a direct violation of their body space: “The thought of strangers sleeping in 26a and treating it like home was like imagining someone moving into your stomach, into your head, into your dreams” (44) since “the experience of a new home involves a partial shedding of the skin” (Ahmed 341). Therefore, Georgia and Bessi are forced to (re)define their physical connection with the new environment as much as both their individual and their twin identity. The deep implications of this process are naïvely presented in the twin’s uncertainty of their identity status in Nigeria: “Will we be Nigerians?” Bessi asked her mother. [...] ‘What do you mean? You are Nigerian now’, she said. ‘But only half,’ Bessi pointed out. ‘If we live there, will we be *all* Nigerian?’” (44; emphasis in the original).

The journey to Nigeria not only affects the twins’ individual selves but marks the beginning of the disintegration of the space of twinship. In Nigeria, the twins have to resort to their dreams -- to imaginary journeys as a way of uniting with each other and recovering a shared space of interaction:

At night, in the first weeks, the twins met each other in the middle of homesick dreams. [...] They navigated the indigo skies hand-in-hand cloud-stepping over

the Mediterranean towards Neasden, and slipped through the front door, up the two flights of stairs and into their room. (54)

With the passing of time, Georgia and Bessi adapt to the new environment and build up a different identity space in their new “G+B triangular room” (50). This ability to create new spaces of familiarity accompanies the twins wherever they go, provided that they are together: “For home had a way of shifting, of changing shape and temperature. Home was homeless. It could exist anywhere, because its only substance was familiarity” (54). Such a description entails a view of home as related to feelings, emotions and affections closely connected to the definition of home as a place that is more than about what Ahmed characterizes as “fantasies of belonging -- where do I originate from -- but that is *sentimentalised* as a space of belonging. [...] being at home is here a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*” (341; emphasis added). Moreover, their capacity to find safe spaces derives from their twin relation in such a way that it can be encapsulated in a view of space as the product of social relations which following Doreen Massey's theory would be “necessarily, by definition, dynamic, changing” (Massey 136).

Nigeria is the place where the twins have to learn, in a distressing way, that despite being twins, they are individual entities. Up until this time, the narrative has united the fate of Georgia and Bessi and they have shared every life experience. However, in Nigeria, Georgia alone undergoes a traumatic incident of sexual assault: “Sedrick put his hand over Georgia’s mouth. It took a lot of coordination. To hold the legs in cartwheel, to cover the mouth, to undo his belt. She was wriggling in all directions” (68). That experience brings about a mental breakdown for Georgia and a struggle to find her place inside the world of twinship. Communication with Bessi is lost: “it was the first time ever, in this land of twoness in oneness, that something had seemed unsayable” (69). From that moment on, the twin relation is altered. Georgia adopts the position of the bad twin -- not

in the sense of the evil one, but in the sense of the one who has been corrupted or brought into the shadows by means of her negative experience -- and views herself as the dark side of their twin relation, while Bessi is the bearer of all the good and positive qualities Sedrick has taken away. Georgia believes that, for Bessi to be protected, she has to absorb all the negative events in their life. Thus the twin relation develops from being the embodiment of “two in one” (superfluity) into the incarnation of the dichotomous qualities of the self (i.e. good and bad) into two identical bodies (incompleteness). As Georgia states: “I needed somewhere that wasn’t bad. I wanted to be light and happy like you, and I wanted never for you to see the dark. I was scared I would infect you with terrible feelings and pictures in my head of walking out in front of the traffic” (181).

Although after their journey to Nigeria, the twins return to the space of their London loft; this is soon confronted by the twins’ individual desire for self-growth. In adolescence, Georgia and Bessi interact with different spaces and people and create a sense of different experiential spaces. From this moment on, the breach formed during their stay in Nigeria becomes wider and gives way to the spatial separation of the twins when they reach adulthood, thus challenging their sense of identity once more: “It was foreign, living like this, coming across each other [...] the way others did, as if they were the same as them, *the twinless ones*. It felt to them like being halved and doubled at the same time” (86-87; emphasis added). The definite spatial separation of the twins is prompted by Bessi’s journey to St Lucia. Bessi’s eagerness to experience oneness contrasts with Georgia’s need to hold on tight to her sister everywhere at any time. The space of the loft becomes small and suffocating for Bessi and she dreams of a new life in a different place, where the twin relation does not operate -- where she is able to discover her individual identity. Bessi needs to escape:

Bessi was getting restless. [...] What would it be like, she wondered, to be lost entirely? To awake in another place, not home, to be stripped of everything until all that was left was your mind and body and the future? (131)

By contrast, Georgia needs her twin in order to maintain a sense of identity, and cope with the traumatic episode she has lived through in Nigeria. Bessi departs for St. Lucia in order to find her roots outside of the relation of twinship and hence codifies her identity through a different route to that of Georgia. Her journey to St. Lucia helps her to root her identity in an Afro-Caribbean genealogy, a referent she lacks at home: “The things. These are the things I came to this island for. To blow my mind with what I didn’t know” (144). Georgia feels incomplete and lost without her twin and this is emphasized when her feelings of emptiness vanish with Bessi’s presence: “The world was the right way up. Holes were filled. There was nothing anymore to dread” (151).

The twins’ uneven experiences in life force them into polarized positions. Whereas Bessi travels to St. Lucia and returns home as a stronger woman, who seeks to pursue her career and to claim her independence, Georgia’s depression renders her incapable of carrying out the simplest task in an everyday life existence (149). Her condition worsens as the twins follow different, separate lives and share fewer spaces of common and private interaction. There is no way back to the innocent space of their childhood and Georgia and Bessi face the coming of an adult life that is bound to separate their destinies. Georgia tries to maintain herself in a stable frame of mind and struggles to recover the past connection with Bessi and the childhood space of the loft but, unable to achieve this aim she commits suicide. Bessi somatizes the death of her sister in her own body, in the form of a rash, and retrieves Baba’s story of Ode in Onia and the belief that her sister has entered her body. This sensory perception has its explanation in the fact that “the loss of a twin is such a devastating one that the surviving one takes on the characteristics of the

dead twin in an endeavour to lessen the sense of loss” (Woodward 12). The twins fuse into a single corporeality that, paradoxically, represents their individuality as much as their twoness. The body in this respect ceases to be the primary identity space of the individual and signifies duality.

Conclusion

At the end of *26a*, with Bessi’s physical embodiment of her sister, the structure of the novel comes full circle. *26a* opens with the description of the twins’ birth and closes with a death that, paradoxically, becomes a symbolic rebirth for both twins. On the one hand, Georgia’s death brings about her spiritual return into the world of the living to inhabit the body of her sister and on the other, Georgia’s final departure -- not after her actual death but after her abandonment of her sister’s body -- means Bessi’s new beginning; Bessi has to negotiate, from now on, her new identity as a singleton. In this respect, if twinship is a powerful metaphor for the in-between -- never complete, never fixed -- position where diasporic identities are located, becoming a singleton can be metaphorically read as bringing to an end such inbetweenness. The fact that Bessi (re)appropriates past Nigerian beliefs as a way of managing her loss consolidates her quest for identity in the African tradition, as well as her acknowledgement of her hybridity. Bessi adapts that tradition to her new situation as a means of reducing the sense of incompleteness, halving and biracialism and, by so doing, highlights *26a* as part of the movement in contemporary Black British women’s writing that questions pre-given, traditional constructions of identity by “simultaneously performing new identities and revisioning old ones” (Bryce 56). Moreover, this tragic ending seems to solve the problematics of twin identity space. Georgia’s inability to cope with life on her own is explained by the idea of incompleteness that has been associated with twins in different societies. Georgia could not find an

identity space as an individual outside the relation of twinship, and considered herself to be the bad half of Bessi's self and therefore an incomplete being. Once she inhabits her sister's body, she finds herself whole again. The superfluity associated with the identity space of twins also comes to an end since the twins unite in one body after Georgia's death, not only in a magical legendary way, but, paradoxically, in a real one: Bessi will forever embody in her physical body space the presence of her sister.

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Notes

¹ The most evident difference between the novels is the fact that Smith focuses her narrative on the ways in which spatial boundaries are established or removed between individuals, according to differences of class, gender and ethnicity in a multicultural London society. In *26a*, however, the focus lies on the space of individual identity.

² According to Evans, *26a* deals with death, grief, depression and sorrow, topics that for Evans need to be brought to the foreground as they are common problems in modern societies: “depression and suicide are very real problems, ones that continue to grow. Britain has the highest suicide rate in Europe, there are around 5,000 suicides a year and it’s increasing” (In Conversation with Evaristo 33). Yet these topics are, in her opinion, “still a taboo in literature” (Wajid 18). Evans dedicates her novel to Paula, her twin sister who, like Georgia, committed suicide when she was 26 years old. Evans created *26a* as a way of acknowledging what had happened to her sister: “my twin passed away and that was like a thunderbolt which threw me into the writing” (Evaristo 33).

³ Brenda Cooper has analysed the depiction of the twins' birth "in terms of a mixture of myths -- African and 'a personal creation myth' (Mishan, first page), including an intertextual reference to the hungry road of their previous lives and of Ben Okri's novel (1992) [*The Famished Road*]" (57).

⁴ Identical twins or monozygotic twins occur in less than four per one thousand births (Schwartz 22).

⁵ Among many others and just to name but a few, this is the case of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), that depicts the legislation against twin infanticide as one of the ways in which western tradition was imposed upon the Igbo people with the arrival of missionaries and colonizers; Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994), whose title is a direct reference to two the names, Tiago and Kehinde, given to twins by Yoruba people; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) where Evans' contemporary portrays the difficult relationship between Olanna and her twin sister Kainene, who goes missing at the end of the novel.

⁶ There are studies of English literature in this field such as those by Karl Miller and Juliana de Nooy. The twins Millat and Magid in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are used to engage with the nature/nurture debate.